

Writing the English Major Exit Portfolio Reflective Essay: A Guide

Starting in Fall 2002, we began asking you to save a number of your papers, beginning with ENG 203 and ending with the Senior Seminar – to put into a portfolio to give to the Department Chair in the month you plan to graduate. Saving your papers is easy enough: just be sure to keep both hard and disk copies and store them in a safe place. When it's time to turn them in, you'll need to compose a reflective essay to put into your portfolio along with the papers. The “why” and “how” of the reflective essay is what we present in this guide.



Why do I need to write a reflective essay?

The English Department is collecting exit portfolios because we want to understand how our majors develop over time – how they grow as a writers and thinkers about language and literature. Specifically, we want to know that, by the time they graduate, our majors can

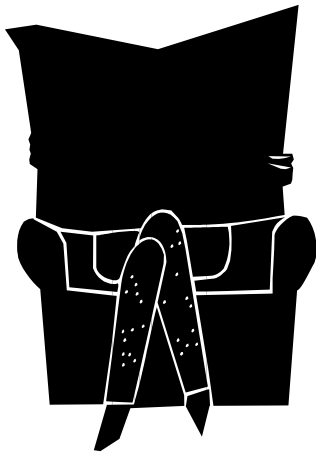
- Produce focused, organized, coherent and persuasive/convincing texts
- Explore a complex idea and argue a thesis at length and in depth
- Read analytically and engage intelligently with primary sources
- Read analytically and engage intelligently with secondary sources
- Test ideas in light of the views of other scholars, critics, and writers
- Have control of the conventions of criticism (literary or rhetorical)
- Have control the conventions of standard edited English
- Control of MLA style and documentation format (including use of bias-free language)

We can learn something about these matters simply by looking at your papers, but reflective essays provide us with real insight into your learning processes. Simply seeing an excellent paper doesn't help us understand how you came to produce that excellent paper. Furthermore, we want our students to be involved in the discussions we are having about our teaching and our courses; reflective essays allow us to hear your voice and give you the opportunity to share your experience as an English major at Eastern.

How do I write this reflective essay?

A reflective essay, first of all, can go at either the beginning or the end of your portfolio – you can decide which is most appropriate. It should be a minimum of 500 words long; typically, it will be a good deal longer than that. It should convey to us your sense of your own development as a writer and thinker, as well as your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of your work.

Here, adapted from Nedra Reynolds' book Portfolio Teaching, are some things you might discuss in your reflective essay; these ideas may also get you thinking about different ways to arrange your portfolio.



- Trace your development as a writer from ENG 203 (Writing for English Majors) through ENG 461/462 (Senior Seminar). Talk in detail about the strengths and weaknesses of each of your papers, chronologically. Give examples of what you mean. (Don't be afraid to quote from your papers.)
- Arrange your papers in order from weakest to strongest, or vice versa (instead of chronologically). Why did you order the papers the way you did? Discuss your best entry and why it is your best, your second-best and why it is second-strongest, and so on.
- Describe the writing process that one or more of your papers went through.

You can do any, all, some, or none of these things; choose the approach that's best for you. However, try to avoid reflecting on how particular teachers influenced you; while some professors may have had more impact on you than others, you're the one who did the work. We want you to take responsibility for that and analyze your own work, not that of your teachers.

Overall, the reflective essay gives you the opportunity to present your work, to convince readers why it should be read in a particular way and that it shows particular strengths. It can also help you to see something you didn't realize before—specifically (we hope), that you really did learn a lot in the time you spent here.

Remember, too, that to complete this requirement you need only turn in the portfolio; it will not be graded, and therefore your GPA or graduation will not be affected if you provide us with constructive criticism about your courses or other aspects of the English major. Remember, though, that *constructive* criticism is what will help us. Imagine this: several of your professors are sitting around a table reading your papers, hearing your voice comment about your own work, and thinking about using your comments to bring about change. What kind of voice do you want them to hear? What kind of voice do you think will be the most persuasive and present you in the best light? That's the voice you'll want to use in your reflective essay.